

*Beyond Governance in Sāmoa:  
Understanding Samoan Political Thought*

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In the Samoan polity today, the indigenous institution of the *matai* (chiefs) continues to play a pivotal role in governance. In determining leadership, the *fa'asāmoa* (Samoan way) and the *fa'amatai* (way of the chiefs) are the most influential factors. Yet this has not prevented Sāmoa from experiencing governance problems found in other countries of the region (although perhaps on a lesser scale): misunderstanding, frustration, alienation, migration, discrimination, malpractice, patronage, and violence. Reasons for this may be (1) a lack of correspondence between *fa'asāmoa* and liberal democracy; (2) a lack of general understanding and critical assessment of the principles of liberal democracy in Sāmoa; (3) a combination of misuse, abuse, or misunderstanding of *fa'asāmoa*; and (4) a lack of publicity and critical assessment of the principles of *fa'asāmoa*.

The governance agenda promoted by international agencies and bilateral donors, and publicly adhered to by the Samoan government, attempts to deal with problems through legislative and institutional reform. It focuses on improving the instruments of parliamentary and bureaucratic government, and on enhancing the roles of the private sector and of contractual civil society (Huffer and Molisa 1999). However, the governance agenda fails to question the principles of liberal democracy and their relevance and ability to blend in with societies that have an established tradition of political thought and philosophy (nor does it query the ability of democracy to withstand the socially destructuring impact of increasing market forces). In addition, it does not attempt to uncover the roots of traditional governance and incorporate them into national debate. These flaws in the governance agenda have been clearly documented in the Pacific and beyond,<sup>1</sup> but little thought has been given to looking beyond the governance agenda.

In a 2004 paper entitled “Have We Been Thinking Upside Down: The Contemporary Emergence of Pacific Theoretical Thought,” Elise Huffer and Ropate Qalo argued for the need to bring Pacific thought, philosophy, and ethics to the fore as one way of addressing contemporary problems experienced throughout the region. Examining academic work that has investigated areas of Pacific thought, the article reports that among the richest sources are the writings of Pacific theologians who have sought to contextualize Christianity. Also valuable are the works of Pacific educationalists, philosophers, and scholars with an interdisciplinary focus. While that paper focuses on the Pacific in general and draws on various examples of work already carried out, it is necessary to carry out much more in-depth research in this area.

In the case of Sāmoa, to look beyond the narrow focus of the governance perspective, we can begin by examining the work of selected Samoan theologians, scholars, and philosophers who have analyzed various aspects of Samoan culture. However, although much has been written about the *fa'asāmoa* and *fa'amatai*, most of it has had an institutional, systemic, or procedural focus. Relatively little has been written about the principles that underpin the system. Important concepts such as *pule* (authority, power); *soālaupule* (joint decision making); *'autasi* (consensus); *alofa* (love, compassion, care); *fa'aaloalo* (respect); *mamalu* (dignity); *fa'autaga*, *tōfā*, and *moe* (all refer to wisdom), and many others, have not been defined extensively, and yet they constitute the basis of indigenous Samoan institutions.<sup>2</sup> It is therefore necessary to carry out much more work, in collaboration with communities, in the area of Samoan political thought, philosophy, and ethics, not with the intent of promoting an idealized version of the *fa'asāmoa* but with the aim of rethinking contemporary political and socioeconomic arrangements to enhance governance. As Morgan Tuimaleali'ifano stated in his thesis, “If Samoans continue to invoke *fa'asāmoa* without defining more clearly what they are invoking and for what purpose, *fa'asāmoa* will continue to be *faigatā* (difficult and ambiguous) and *fa'alavelave* (a necessary burden). When meanings are clearly established, it should be possible to put a finger on the pulse of their transformation and thereby determine the course and direction of change” (1997, 310).

When embarking on this road, a comment made by a person interviewed by Huffer and Alfred Schuster in 1999 keeps coming to mind. Our respondent, when asked (in English) about his thoughts about “governance,” confused it with the term “covenant” (Huffer and Schuster 2000, 46, and note 14). Although this arose as a result of a misunderstanding,

his answer was lucid. This may be because in the Samoan context, traditional governance principles can in many ways be conceived in terms of a covenant, in the sense of mutual respect and reciprocity.

This paper looks at ways of reassessing governance in the Samoan context by drawing mainly on literature that touches on various aspects of Samoan political thought, as well as on discussions with Samoan scholars and thinkers.<sup>3</sup> In this introduction to a different approach to Samoan governance, we briefly review some of the political forces and tensions at play in Sāmoa to show how they impact current political conceptualization.

### “BENIGN” CUSTOMS

Tongan scholar Futa Helu wrote that there are two types of customs or “cultural traditions.” One is concerned with “promot[ing] the general welfare of the group or community as a whole”; these Helu called “benign customs.” The second set of “customs and values” is designed to “maintain or consolidate the power of the ruling élite” (Helu 1997, 1). While Helu distinguished the two by providing examples,<sup>4</sup> they are closely linked and are rarely thought of as separate. Custom is generally seen of as a monolithic whole that is passed on from a divine and ancestral source and from generation to generation. In the case of Sāmoa, as Lalomilo Kamu explained, “the Samoans insist that their culture is of divine origin. . . . According to the people, their culture is not exclusively a human achievement because its origin was from god Tagaloa: it was he who gave them direction for organising and giving life. This is evident in the creation story where god Tagaloa’s first council was used as the model for the *fono* (village council) in Sāmoa. This model for council is still regarded as the source of authority, direction and unity in the villages in Sāmoa” (1996, 36).

This divine connection gives coherence and meaning to culture and makes it a positive force. According to Kamu, Samoans view their culture as “basically good, it is for the good of its people, for the whole of society, and it is relevant because it has grown out of the living experiences of the people. Through its structures and rituals it preserves and perpetuates the core values of society” (1996, 37).

However, because culture is seen as being transferred from divine origin and is accepted as being basically good, it becomes all the more difficult to analyze and to question.<sup>5</sup> Tuimaleali‘ifano stated this differently but with the same result when he wrote that in “oral-based cultures, the possession of a personal point of view and a desire to question and expose

contradictions are not readily encouraged” (1997, ix). Custom, in this scenario, becomes the preserve of the powerful, who manipulate it at will.

While we cannot discount the fact that for many people custom or culture is indivisible and makes up a coherent ensemble (Aiono Fana‘afi’s vision of the *fa‘asāmoa* as a sociometric wheel [1992], discussed later, is a good illustration of this), Helu’s distinction between the two types can help us focus on the “benign” customs or values, or those that serve the welfare of society as a whole. While doing this we should not naively think that these can exist independently from the customs of the elite (on which Tuimaleali‘ifano’s work centers). The purpose of concentrating on “benign” customs, rather, is to look at how contemporary governance can be enhanced by indigenous values and principles that are generally not written about. It is precisely to prevent their easy manipulation by the elite that customary or indigenous political principles must be brought to the fore and become part of a national public debate.

In exploring Samoan political values and principles, it is also important to keep in mind how they can contribute to improving the relationship between *fa‘asāmoa* and the liberal democratic model adopted by Sāmoa at the national level. Tuimaleali‘ifano stated: “Reconciling existing contradictions in the dual system of governance perhaps presents the greatest single challenge facing Samoans and their leaders” (1997, 13). The works of other Samoan scholars take up this challenge, including Unasa Va‘a’s documentation of the delicate balancing act between village and state governance (2000), Peggy Fairbairn-Dunlop’s analysis of urban-based non-governmental organizations (2000), and Iati Iati’s examination of kin-based civil society (2000). Malama Meleisea, for his part, suggested that “problems are linked to the fact that Samoans are living in two worlds, a situation which is breeding a kind of moral confusion.” He added, “The problem is not that there are contradictions between new and old principles, but that these two sets of principles can be selectively invoked to justify almost any action” (2000, 193). We might add that principles are selectively invoked because many of them are not well articulated publicly. This is partly because they have not been sufficiently theorized and assessed.<sup>6</sup>

Although a cross section of Samoans interviewed by Huffer and Schuster in 1998 appeared reluctant to blame the clashes between the *fa‘amatai* and liberal democracy for breakdowns in governance, it is clear that political changes over the last forty years have increased “confusion about people’s rights and duties” (2000, 60). As Huffer and Schuster stated in that earlier research, “Stemming this confusion requires openness, a more

appropriate circulation of information and a debate to re-negotiate contemporary norms” (2000, 60). The identification and exploration of Samoan political values and ideals should be a large part of this debate.<sup>7</sup>

Another related element to keep in mind is that governance problems in Sāmoa, as elsewhere in the Pacific, stem to a large extent from a lack of successful checks and balances. This applies to both the *fa’amatai* and the national government. Referring to Guy Powles’s assessment of *matai* power, Tuimaleali‘ifano stated, “Powles rightly points to the absence of an effective constitutional provision regulating local governments at the village and district level” and he concluded, “This has allowed the *matai* system to grow and assert itself unchecked in all spheres of society” (1997, 19).<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Sāmoa suffers from a lack of checks on the government. This was starkly illustrated in the Commission of Inquiry’s report on the Controller and Chief Auditor’s Report to the Legislative Assembly (1994), which stated that “given the realities of the system . . . the House, in fact, is not a deliberative body” (quoted in Huffer and Schuster 2000, 59).

While these are institutional problems, they are also closely tied to people’s awareness (or lack of awareness) of basic principles underpinning both *fa’asāmoa* and liberal democracy. Liberal democratic principles are well publicized internationally but not regionally and locally. Yet an abundant literature can be drawn on to create greater awareness. The same cannot be said about the principles of *fa’asāmoa*. And though some may argue that Samoans already know and understand the values of *fa’asāmoa* and *fa’amatai*, they are rarely discussed and questioned openly. This is an aspect of contemporary Samoan political culture that should be addressed (see Huffer and Schuster 2000). Tuimaleali‘ifano also commented on the need to teach children and youth the value of openness and critical thinking: “In the ideal classroom, children are urged to question and developed to think freely and to express individual points of view. At home, such freedoms vaporize into thin air in deference to the collective will whose sources of knowledge are often dispersed, concealed and accepted uncritically” (1997, x). This lack of openness and debate contributes to the manipulation of “custom” by the elite.

#### AN EXAMPLE OF REEXAMINING VALUES

This section (taken in large part from Huffer and Qalo 2004) demonstrates how work carried out by Fa‘au‘uga Logovae on wisdom in the theological context can tell us a lot about Samoan political conceptualization.

In his 1982 thesis, entitled “Wisdom in the Samoan Context with Special Reference to the *Matai* System: A Theological Interpretation,” Logovae examined the various components that make up the concept of wisdom, namely *tōfā*, *moe*, and *fa’autaga*.<sup>9</sup> He began by looking at the different meanings of the word *tōfā* (which can mean good-bye, night-time, or be a courteous word for sleep, a term used when addressing a *tūlāfale* [orator], or the most important *‘ie-toga* [fine mat] received by an *ali‘i* [chief]), all of which are related to wisdom. Of particular interest is Logovae’s explanation that, for Samoans, the mere “presence” of an orator is a sign of his or her “prudence” (ie, his *tōfā*). This implies that holding a leadership position such as that of orator has certain obligations attached to it—specifically to think things over carefully and to exercise prudence and caution.

Logovae concluded his explanation of *tōfā* by saying that it is a concept related to chiefs because: “*Tōfā* is more than the knowledge acquired by a person. . . . [It is] the result of many years of observation, gathering, scrutinizing, developing, improving and analysing of culture. . . . [The chief] observes and acquires from what is provided by nature; he also acquires from what is available in tradition and history” (1982, 5–6). The criteria thus established for leadership are of a very high standard. According to this analysis of *tōfā*, a leader is someone who must be able to analyze, reflect, understand his or her environment, and translate that into a “presence.”

According to another Samoan scholar who spoke with us, the term *tōfā mamao* is used to indicate even greater wisdom, such as being able to judge the consequences of an action, that is, a prophetic quality of looking into the future. Interestingly, it is not a term associated with politicians except in the context of recognizing the chiefly status of a well-respected *ali‘i* who also happens to be a politician.

Related to *tōfā* is the concept of *moe*. *Moe* implies a high degree of humility and service: it is a humble way of referring to sleep and also refers to working on the farm or garden (because gardens are sometimes far from the village, it is more efficient to stay there overnight in order to start farming early in the morning before the sun gets too hot). By implication, *moe* means that one looks after the family. As Logovae explained: “[The] emphasis is on having enough food for the family to enable them to live well. The Samoan wisdom presupposes that the person must live well” (1982, 9). At a time in Sāmoa where economic equity is fast disappearing, it might be useful to appeal to this aspect of Samoan wisdom as a means

of addressing this issue—particularly as one of the growing reasons for malgovernance in Sāmoa is many people’s quasi-desperation for cash.

*Moe* is also the term that is used to describe the “wealth of knowledge” of the orator (Logovae 1982, 9).<sup>10</sup> But when the orator enters into relations with other *matai*, “his” *moe* is transformed into *fa‘autaga*. Logovae explained that *fa‘autaga* is made up of three words—*fa‘a*, *uta*, and *ga*—which when combined imply the following:

- that wisdom is a burden and an obligation for those who assume it (*uta* means load);
- that wisdom is “shrewdness” and the ability to “consider [things] carefully,” to have “sagacious and sharp insights,” to be “clever or sharp in practical affairs”;
- that wisdom is “deeply imbedded in land” (*uta* also means landward; it can refer either to the village or to where the land or forest are depending on where the speaker is positioned);
- and that, as both a gift from the land and a burden, “though [wisdom is] a privilege, responsibilities are its constant companion.” (1982, 13, 15)

As Logovae explained, wisdom is a practical concept: the orator’s role is not to distance himself from his people but to serve them with his *fa‘autaga*. But it also has an ontological dimension in that it is a gift that is already present and “embedded” in the land.

Although Logovae’s motivation for explaining the different facets of Samoan wisdom is essentially theological, his presentation contributes to our discussion in the following ways:

- it demonstrates the existence of a sophisticated and integrated philosophy of wisdom and service;
- it defines expectations of leadership that are relevant to and applicable in the contemporary context;
- and it promotes a view of service that neglects no one and which focuses on the well-being of all.

Logovae’s discussion also demonstrates that these values could be integrated into “contextualized” or “customized” laws or codes of conduct, and even be written into the constitution as guidelines for leadership in Sāmoa. Such homegrown concepts that people understand and that have been a part of local culture and language for many years are likely to be

more meaningful than those terms currently employed in governance rhetoric. Using concepts understood by people at all levels of society helps make leaders more accountable. While terms such as good governance, the rule of law, democracy, human rights, and development are often seen as outside impositions and seldom understood, long-standing local concepts translate ideals of social justice, welfare for all, service for the people, and so on into local frameworks. In addition, use of these terms allows for a better understanding of vague phrases such as “Samoan custom and tradition” and “Samoan custom and usage” (*aga’ifanua ma aganu’u fa’asāmoa*), used in the Constitution of the Independent State of Sāmoa.<sup>11</sup>

Critics may argue that many customary concepts cannot be well defined and are not equivalent to modern concepts of governance. For instance, Tuimaleali’ifano stated that “equivalents of [democratic concepts of transparency, accountability and equity] in customs and traditions are difficult to find” (2000, 183). However, this may be because we have not genuinely attempted to fully understand, theorize, and publicize Samoan concepts. We could also affirm that transparency has traditionally been a feature of public exchange and interaction, and that it is mainly the introduction of money that has dealt a blow to transparency in Sāmoa. What then are the Samoan equivalents of equity, transparency, and accountability?<sup>12</sup> Are these concepts framed in different terms but with similar outcomes? These are the kinds of areas that must be further researched and discussed.

### CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL FORCES AND TENSIONS

Investigating Samoan values should also help us better understand the forces at work in contemporary Samoan politics. While the values that Logovae highlighted are ideals (as are all values), they reflect an integrated philosophy in which various apparently separate elements tie together to make a coherent whole. The philosophy of wisdom described by Logovae depends, as he explained, on the notion of *tautua* (service) and the role of the *taule’ale’a* (untitled male): “It is [in the *taule’ale’a* life] that the conditioning of the Samoan life is staged on the principle of *tōfā-moe-fa’a-utaga* [wisdom]” (1982, 16).

It is through *tautua*, which literally means “fighting from the back,” that is, being behind the *matai*, that the *taule’ale’a* acquires the dimensions necessary for future leadership. Implied in this notion is that the future leader has not only put in the hard work and apprenticeship necessary but also intimately understands what it is like to be “in the back.”



The role of the *taule‘ale‘a* is also tightly connected to or founded on the family unit, which is made up of reciprocal relationships based on reciprocal respect. It is, accordingly, the role of the *matai* to ensure these relationships remain intact (Logovae 1982, 18).

Relationships are obviously fundamental to Samoan politics. The principles that underpin these relationships are, however, no less fundamental. In his analysis of power, Bradd Shore described *complementary* and *symmetrical* relationships—respectively, the nonconfrontational relationships of *ali‘i/tūlāfale* (chief/orator), *tamafafine/tamatane* (sister/brother), etc. and the competitive relationships of village/village, brother/brother, senior orator/minor orator, etc. Shore noted that underpinning these relationships are the basic concepts of *pule* (authority), *mamalu* (dignity), *feagaiga* (the covenant between brother and sister), and so on. Although he did not analyze these concepts himself, he gave examples of their application. In particular, he quoted an *ali‘i* who explained how he maintained his dignity by refusing food “in the house of another person” in his village. The chief added, “The dignity of the *ali‘i* lies in his cautiousness and wariness—in his holding back (*tāofiofi*). The other thing about the *ali‘i*—if he makes a promise, it is kept. He must never fail to do that” (quoted in Shore 1982, 242). In this case, the *ali‘i* demonstrated the high degree of honor and ethical standards associated with his leadership function and his relationship to others. This is further illustrated by the associated notion: “The more highly ranked *ali‘i* are known as *sa‘o*, which literally means ‘the straight one’ or ‘the correct one’” (Shore 1982, 243).

#### UNDERSTANDING *PULE*

Shore went on to add that the orators must be cunning and clever, and that through their hard work and cleverness, they reap the “handouts” (244). He wrote, “Today the term *pule* has become symbolically identified with orators rather than with *ali‘i*” (245), which appears to imply that *pule* or power may be seen in less ethical terms. Contrasting with this view is that expressed by people from two villages interviewed by University of the South Pacific graduate student Ianesi Enosa, who stated that one of the qualities of *matai* suffrage and by extension *matai* politics, was dignity. It appears that Enosa’s respondents were not just referring to *ali‘i* but to *matai* in general. It therefore seems important to reassess what is really meant by notions such as *feagaiga*, *pule*, *mamalu*, and *fa‘aaloalo* (sister/brother relationship, authority, dignity, and respect), how they are related, and how they are perceived within the *fa‘amatai* and particularly in rela-

tion to parliamentary politics. Although we may not get clear-cut definitions of these terms, better identifying their meanings and interpretations should tell us more about what Samoans consider to be fundamentally good or bad governance, from the perspective of the *fa'amatai*. This should enable us to reassess governance issues using a Samoan perspective thereby going beyond the governance agenda.

Another element that must be looked at is who in Sāmoa holds authority and how it is distributed and appropriated. For instance, Kamu made it clear that *pule* belongs to the 'āiga (extended family) even though it is held by the *matai*: "The *pule* (power) which is inherent in the title and exercised by the titleholder for the benefit of the 'āiga, remains the property of the 'āiga. The 'āiga gives the *pule* to the *matai* but if it is abused, bringing shame and disgrace to the 'āiga, and if the titleholder does not repent, the family has no other choice but to withdraw the title, thus withdrawing the *pule* (authority) from him!" (Kamu 1996, 131).<sup>13</sup>

Sale'imoa Va'ai further examined the different forms of *pule* in the village context, which, he stated, are "divisible into *pulefa'avae* or constitutive authority, *pulefa'asoa* or distributive authority, *pulefa'aogā* or exploitative authority and *pulefa'amalumalu* or protective authority" (1999, 42). *Pulefa'avae*, he explained, belongs to the village as a whole and concerns "all village property and inhabitants," while *pulefa'asoa* refers to use of land and "other family property" that comes under the jurisdiction of family *matai*. He added that *pulefa'asoa* also regulates the "acceptance or admission of new *matai* into the village council" (42). *Pulefa'aogā* refers to the exploitation of land by those who have rights to occupy it, while *pulefa'amalumalu* refers to the authority of all in the village to ensure the "village estate and welfare" are looked after, that is, protected (42). This categorization not only points to the many dimensions of the concept of *pule* but also to a diffusion of power or authority. It demonstrates that the care of the village and its physical and human assets is dependent on many actors and forms of authority that are clearly distinguished one from the other.

Although *pule* (in its varied forms) is always used to refer to authority in the village context (ie, in the *fa'amatai* context), the same cannot be said of the national context where government is often associated with the idea of *tūlāfono* (the law). This distinction demonstrates that people differentiate the two spheres and have not integrated national government (or parliament) into an indigenous or native conceptualization of authority. How this impacts on citizens' relations with government and their ideas of what government's role is should be further examined. Sim-

ilarly, how *pule* is articulated and practiced within the *fa‘amatai* must be better understood so that its meaning can be better applied in the contemporary context and related to the role of the national government.

### A “SOCIOMETRIC WHEEL”?

The fundamental connectedness of Samoan philosophy outlined by Logovae also brings to mind the concept of the “sociometric wheel” described by Aiono Fana‘afi. The sociometric wheel consists of the various groups that make up *fa‘amatai* social organization. Here the *matai* group is the “hub” and the other groups consist of circles that “exist side by side and operate and inter-relate in concentric connections of blood ties and marital reciprocity.” Aiono illustrated this with a diagram of five circles: that of the *matai* is placed in the center and the other four (daughters of the village, the untitled men of the village, the chief’s wives, and the children) each overlap into the *matai*’s circle.<sup>14</sup> The circles, which are both self-containing and connected, reemphasize the idea of unity, collaboration, and wholeness within the *fa‘amatai*. Each group fits in harmoniously with the others and all depend on each other to function smoothly (1992, 118–124).

However, when one looks closely at Samoan politics, we find strong opposing forces: centripetal and centrifugal.<sup>15</sup> In Aiono’s idea of the sociometric wheel,<sup>16</sup> the *fa‘asāmoa* holds all the subgroups or circles together. The circles overlap but they are also self-contained and coherent units. In contemporary Sāmoa, however, universal suffrage has introduced a foreign element in the circles, creating an opening through which the youth, particularly, “escape” or are “pulled out.” In effect, the young men and women (as well as the *matai*) are no longer contained solely within their circle. Thus while the *fa‘amatai* strives to maintain the relationship between circles intact, it is fighting against forces which are pulling members away from the circle.<sup>17</sup>

Other earlier changes have also been disruptive to the sociometric wheel (colonization, the introduction of money, etc), and Samoan society, like other societies worldwide, has always been torn between centralizing and decentralizing forces. But Aiono affirmed the *fa‘asāmoa* has been able to incorporate change. She illustrated this with the example, among others, of Christianity and the fact that the pastors became *feagaiga* (in covenant with the village) and thus part of the circle or group *tama‘ita‘i* (daughters of the village).<sup>18</sup> In addition, until the 1991 election, the constitution instituted *matai* suffrage, which kept the choosing of leaders coherent with

*fa'asāmoa*. Tuimaleali'ifano stated, however, that far from being successful, *matai* suffrage led to Samoans “subverting their most revered social institution and power base in the name of custom” (1997, 19). It is not our purpose here to go into a discussion on the merits of *matai* suffrage versus universal suffrage but just to point out that although the *fa'amatai* ideally brings all political constituents together in a harmonious pattern, there are many forces pushing Samoan politics in other directions. A thorough investigation of Samoan political conceptualization would also help us better understand the contradictions within the contemporary *fa'amatai* and how the latter is articulated with liberal democracy.

### RECIPROCITY

Some of the elements that are fundamental to Samoan political conceptualization—such as *fa'aaloalo* (respect), *mamalu* (dignity), and *alofa* (care, compassion, love)—and that are implicit in Samoan principles/institutions, such as the *feagaiga* (the relationship between a brother and sister in which respect is paramount)—are intimately linked to the ideas of reciprocity and publicity. *Fa'aaloalo*, which literally refers to two people facing each other in a soothing relationship, implies a balance and reciprocity between all (traditional) political entities engaging with each other. For instance, originally, at the village political level, the *feagaiga* assumed a balanced role between not only brother and sister but also between the *fono a matai* (chiefly council) and the *fono a tama'ita'i* (daughters of *matai* council). Today, this balance has in many cases been set aside both at the family level,<sup>19</sup> and at the village level, in many cases, the *fono a matai* has become the main, if not the sole, decision maker.<sup>20</sup> Yet people still refer daily to the concept of *feagaiga*. It is important to understand why and how this principle of solidarity and reciprocity has evolved in people's thinking and to what extent it is or can be made applicable at different levels of the polity.

Financial stresses have also modified the practice of *fa'aaloalo* and *mamalu* in many places, even though, like the associated concept of *feagaiga*, they remain strong values shared by Samoans generally. For instance, while it is the traditional role of the *tūlāfale* to uphold the prestige and dignity of the *ali'i*, in exchange for which the orator receives material goods (see Shore above), in cases where the *ali'i* are under economic pressure, they hold on to the goods they would formerly have distributed, in order to look after their own family and interests. Thus the

relationship between the *ali‘i* and the *tūlāfale* becomes disjointed and unbalanced (or corrupt). In light of these changes in practice, it is useful to understand how this dimension of *fa‘aloalo* is still conceptualized and whether and how it should be reactualized or reinvigorated.<sup>21</sup>

*Fa‘aloalo* has another related function as a guarantor of social order. The reciprocal obligations contained in the concept establish not only a chain of command going from the elders to the youths (titled to untitled) but also a complementarity of roles. For instance, the description of the young untitled men of the village as *o le mālosi o le nu‘u* connotes that “‘you are the leaders of tomorrow’ or ‘this village depends on you’” (Miller 1980, 86–87). The expectation of greater authority in the future but also of current appreciation of one’s role today (at least in the ideal) establishes a balance, minimizing or masking the idea of domination (for more on this topic, see Huffer and So‘o 2003). Linked to this is the idea that all persons know exactly where they fit and what behavior is required of them in all circumstances.

#### SECURITY, PURPOSE, AND PRIDE

This knowledge leads to a sense of security, purpose, and pride, which Keene described as being important aspects of the “Samoan ethos.” A feeling of security arises, according to Keene, not only from a relatively benign natural environment (except in cataclysmic cases of cyclones) and from “the perception of children as assets rather than liabilities,” but also from “the structuring of interaction events” (1978, 48). A sense of purpose comes from the fact that Samoan society gives importance to all the roles played by people within the groups they belong to, that is, everyone knows they will be respected as a member of one of the circles of the village because they all have a function to play in the organization of society. As Keene noted, in Sāmoa, “men of 70 may [still] be politically ambitious”; further: “The cultural emphasis is on goals which are capable of satisfaction (eg, performing in public, gaining political power, and receiving gestures of respect)” (1978, 49).

Pride, Keene added, is a feature “related to an egalitarian spirit.” As he pointed out, while Sāmoa has “a complex hierarchy of titles, there is no class distinction. Every *‘āiga* (extended family, kin group) has a chief and thus its dignity, and in the classificatory kinship terminology, every Samoan is the son or daughter of a chief” (Keene 1978, 50). Thus, except in particular ceremonial circumstances, no member of an *‘āiga* is expected

to defer to a member of another *‘āiga*, even when the latter has a title of higher status. In addition, it is not considered appropriate to exaggerate or exploit one’s importance and those who do are usually laughed at or frowned on.<sup>22</sup> This strong emphasis on the principle of egalitarianism (though not always on its practice; see Huffer and So’o 2003), articulated through the fact that each *‘āiga* has a *matai* (and therefore has *mamalu*), has also been described by Serge Tcherkézoff, who views this as an asset of the Samoan polity. In contrast, the “theoretical equality (of access to vote)” in universal suffrage brings with it the many inequalities of “Western style politics” (Tcherkézoff 1998, 431). As Mālama Meleiseā pointed out (1987),<sup>23</sup> the traditional Samoan egalitarianism is reflected in the fact that high status has never been equated with particular economic privilege. *‘Āiga* are closely linked to an area of land and thus to the resources needed for basic well-being (or at least for basic economic security). As Tcherkézoff put it (although this is starting to change), regardless of status, “all Samoans are gardeners and planters and are very proud of their taro fields” (1998, 420).

Unlike Samoan political thought, liberal democratic thinking evolved in a context of great social and economic inequality and injustice. By seeking to provide everyone with equal access to politics through institutions such as universal suffrage, it has managed, over a few hundred years, to undermine the strict class systems that used to prevail in European countries. However, it appears less and less capable of dealing efficiently with the recent growing inequalities created by corporate capitalism and financial speculation (or globalization),<sup>24</sup> and has been unable to redress injustices fomented by colonialism and neocolonialism.<sup>25</sup>

From a governance perspective, security and purpose are important political goods, which, as they currently exist in Sāmoa, are jeopardized by the liberal ethos—and though Samoans and other Pacific Islanders seldom articulate it in this way, it is a large part of what underlines their suspicion of western democracy. Physical and property security in Sāmoa is guaranteed not by the police or by the army but by people’s adherence to *fa’aaloalo*, not as a notion they fear (although fear of retribution is a factor of control) so much as one that they hold to be valuable. *Fa’aaloalo*, as a benign custom that gives meaning and peace to people, is, like all principles, endangered by the actions of people who deliberately abuse and transform it into an authoritarian tool. It is also threatened by the western notion of security, which is reduced (in its most basic form and bluntly stated) to the negative right of the individual to be protected from the state and other individuals.

This discrepancy raises the issue of human rights, which is closely tied to the governance agenda. Security in the international human rights context is heavily focused on the individual and on the (theoretical) equality of opportunity rather than on redistributive justice or on real economic and social security (Mutua 2002). This is also a point raised by Tamasailau Su‘aali‘i-Sāuni and others in their discussion of the treatment of Samoan youth offenders in New Zealand, where they observed (especially before the passage of the 1989 Child, Young Persons and their Families Act) the problem has been framed in terms of individual responsibility and “retributive justice” rather than by using Samoan frames of reference, such as group/family identity and “restorative and reintegrative justice” (2002, 7). In the face of increasing global uncertainty and growing socioeconomic inequalities, it is not a luxury to reexamine Samoan notions—such as by *fa‘aaloalo* (mutual respect and engagement) and associated concepts such as *va fealoalao‘i* (relations between *‘āiga*) raised by Su‘aali‘i-Sāuni and others in the New Zealand context—that contribute to affording people security, purpose, and pride (to use Keene’s terminology).

Also inherent in traditional Samoan political conceptualization is the notion of publicity, in the sense that in principle discussion occurs in open settings where all can hear what is being said, even if they cannot always take part, and distribution of goods is a public act. The emphasis on publicity in Samoan life (demonstrated by, among other things, the practice of open *fale*) leads to what Keene called a “public ethic” wherein individual behavior is restrained and monitored by the group, rather than by the individual (1978, 316). While one may or may not agree with the whole of Keene’s analysis (1978, 60–62), it may in part explain some of the governance discrepancies currently experienced in Sāmoa. While the traditional system relies on “others” to hold leaders accountable (they are controlled socially and politically by being highly visible to all at most times), the western system of politics, which Sāmoa has adopted at the national level, entails a high degree of privacy and closed-door interaction and negotiating. Even though in representative parliamentary democracies proceedings are public, most policy is conceived and designed before reaching parliament, in closed quarters; a closed cabinet is the last step in a process of reduced publicity. Although in the Westminster system there is an open process of public consultation before bills become laws, many parliaments throughout the world act as rubber stamps, with secretive horse-trading taking place prior to debate in the legislature. In many countries, governments are legally entitled to pass decrees that are akin to laws, with very little public consultation. In many modern democracies this has led to an

attitude of secrecy and dealing between “experts” (more and more of whom are financiers), which is contemptuous of the public or citizens; the contempt is even more obvious in the realm of foreign affairs.<sup>26</sup> Much of public awareness in this setting relies on information being filtered through the media and people being educated to question the system, and on a “private ethic” being exercised by leaders, as well as checks on the executive by the judiciary.

In Sāmoa, where accountability has traditionally relied on people being able to see their leaders on a daily basis and on their interacting using notions such as *fa’aaloalo* (mutual respect), the western system has introduced a layer of opacity. Sāmoa does not have the means that the older, established democracies have put in place—secondary education for all and tertiary education for significant numbers, access to modern technology and ideas circulating in universities and think tanks, quality educational public television and radio programming, quality infrastructure, etc—to help monitor public developments by the citizens.<sup>27</sup> But Sāmoa does have traditional principles that should be better understood, publicized, critically assessed, and integrated in a meaningful way at the level of national politics in order to counterbalance the flaws of neoliberal democracy.

## CONCLUSION

In our research on political perspectives in Sāmoa (Huffer and Schuster 2000; Huffer and So’o 2003), we have found the following: although there are exceptions, those who are the staunchest advocates of *fa’amatai* and its associated concepts are generally those of high status both within the traditional polity and within the “modern” institutions of Sāmoa. They tend to view Samoan principles and practices of governance in an uncritical way and campaign for their continued application. They blame the introduced political system and accompanying values for governance problems.

On the flip side, the most determined and vocal advocates of representative democracy are (unsurprisingly) those who interact professionally in the urban environment, and have spent time abroad as successful businesspeople, diplomats, or journalists. They view attempts at emphasizing Samoan political conceptualizations with suspicion and fear that an emphasis on “cultural values” will provide public officials with “refuge from accountability in public life” (Editorial, *Samoa Observer*, 11 Dec



2002). The larger part of Samoan society lies between these two stances, with some wishing for more modern democratic features and others feeling more at ease with *fa’amatai* principles. For the sake of Samoan politics and society, there must be greater critical awareness and public debate of and engagement with the norms and practices of both systems. We hope this paper is a small contribution in this direction.

\* \* \*

### *Glossary of Key Samoan Terms*

- ‘āiga*: extended family, kin group  
*ali‘i*: high chief  
*alofa*: care, compassion, love  
*fa’aaloalo*: respect  
*fa’amatai*: way of the chiefs  
*fa’asāmoa*: Samoan way  
*fa’autaga*: wisdom  
*feagaiga*: the covenant between brother and sister  
*mamalu*: dignity  
*matai*: chiefs  
*moe*: sleep, working on the farm or garden, providing for one’s family, an orator’s knowledge  
*pule*: authority  
*tautua*: service  
*taule‘ale‘a*: untitled male  
*tōfā*: good-bye, nighttime, sleep, a term used when addressing an orator (his wisdom or prudence), or the most important fine mat received by an *ali‘i*  
*tūlāfale*: orator

### *Notes*

1 See, for instance, Leftwich 1993, Larmour 1998, and Huffer and Molisa 1999.

2 Definitions of *soālaupule* and *pule* have been put forward by Aiono (1992), Va‘ai (1999), and Huffer and So‘o (2003), among others, but a more profound understanding of their nuances, applications, and ramifications is warranted.

3 We have chosen not to name the people we spoke with to preserve their anonymity.

4 Helu stated that “‘benign’ customs are . . . strategies for survival in resource-poor environments, as in the words of a proverb: *Me‘a si‘i, femolimoli‘i; me‘a lahi, takitaba kai*’ (Food in scarcity you must always share; in abundance, though, you need not care).” The “second class of customs” he illustrated thusly: “An example of this are political cultural traditions such as the *kava* ceremony which shows through the positioning of the participants how power is distributed (and should remain so) in a community, and how food and other resources should be shared or distributed. . . . Such rituals are object lessons or social theatre aimed at showing precisely where power lies” (1997, 1).

5 Ama Tofāeono made a similar assessment regarding the *Lotu* (Church) when he wrote, “The Lotu in Sāmoa has had a glorious reputation, and to pose a public critique of the Lotu is almost viewed as a violation of the sanctity of the Divine” (2000, 131).

6 Tofāeono cited Peter Buck about how the Christian religion was promoted in the nineteenth century could be applied to education about politics in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: “And while influenced by teachers of their own race to become ashamed of ancient religious practices [Samoans were at the same time] purposely denied even a theoretical knowledge” (2000, 104).

7 At the same time, a discussion of corporate and speculative capitalism and its destructive impact on society and on democracy should be promoted. There is very little debate about these developments in Pacific Islands states where the leadership and the elite are closely related to the world of finance and therefore do not find it in their interest to question it.

8 The *fa‘amatai* does have built-in checks and balances (see Keene 1978), but these have been somewhat diluted with the pressures of modernization/globalization. In addition, the notion of checks and balances itself is western in origin, whereas in Samoan thought complementarity and competition (as outlined in Shore 1982) are emphasized; but both these notions emphasize the need to balance and diffuse power.

9 For a detailed explanation of all the meanings of these terms, see Logovae 1982.

10 Logovae wrote: “The orator acquires, possesses and develops . . . *moe* for the specific purpose of insuring the welfare and security of his family” (1982, 10).

11 In his thesis, Tuimaleali‘ifano stated, “The power of custom persists partly because it is enshrined in the country’s constitution” (1997, viii). One could argue to the contrary that custom has persisted in spite of the constitution, which, aside from the section on “Land and Titles” (part 1x) and brief mentions in the pre-amble and in the section on “Freedom from Forced Labour,” does not at all

focus on Samoan customs, and makes no attempt at defining them in the same way the rights of citizens are defined.

12 The recent use of the term “accountability” hails from the discipline and practice of accounting. Although the term is recent, the idea it conveys is not new. It has come into popular usage due to the growing impact of finance and financial managers in public life (see, eg, Gupta 2002).

13 Although Kamu here associates *pule* with power, *pule* is more generally translated as authority. Power is usually defined as *malosiaga* or *mamana*.

14 Aiono labels these circles or groups the daughters of the *matai*, the sons of the *matai*, the wives of *matai*, and young children (*tama‘ita‘i/feagaiga*; ‘*aumaga*; *faletua ma tausi*, and *tamaiti*) (1992, 118–119).

15 Bradd Shore described these tensions somewhat differently in his analysis of four types of social relationships in Sāmoa: incorporation, authority, overt competition, and covenants of mutual respect (1982, 209–216). He also wrote about symmetrical relations (which emphasize rivalry and aggression) versus complimentary relations (which emphasize respect and collaboration). See Shore 1982, 193–220.

16 In a similar analogy of the circular embodiment of Samoan culture, Tcherkézoff described the choosing of a title as taking place in a “sacred circle” (1998, 326).

17 In her master’s research (not yet completed), Ianesi Enosa, a graduate student at the University of the South Pacific, has found that rural Samoans who are against universal suffrage are opposed to it mainly on the basis of the youth being given too much authority and lacking respect for the *matai* as a result of being allowed an electoral voice.

18 Kamu argued that the *feagaiga* relationship is actually detrimental to the role of the pastor: “Often the pastor perceives himself as having the image or role of a chief, assuming authority and prestige comparable to that of a titleholder. Conflict and tension are often the result, especially when the pastor asserts that he has the final authority over the affairs of the congregations” (1996, 140; see also Kamu 1996, 142).

19 “Often in family title discussions the brothers do not show respect for the *feagaiga* and her children” (Oka Fau‘olo, pers comm, Dec 2002).

20 This often depends on the balance of power within individual families and villages, and on the individuals in positions of leadership, but there is a general trend toward the undoing of the notion of *feagaiga* in practice.

21 Elsewhere (Huffer and So‘o 2003), we have criticized the overemphasis on (or abuse of the notion of) *fa‘aaloalo* in consensual decision making, where it is sometimes used to deter lower status individuals from openly participating in the discussions. Consultation occurs in some villages/families and not in others but all would say they are practicing *fa‘aaloalo*. This is why it is important to define

or redefine *fa'aaloalo* so that all group and individual interests are taken into account as much as possible without disrupting social fabric.

22 Keene put this in another way: “any attempt on the part of the child of a high ranking chief to exploit his position is more likely to be met with violence than obsequiousness” (1978, 50).

23 See also Tcherkézoff 1998 and Keene 1978. Keene wrote, “No one is thought to be above manual labor, and chiefs as well as untitled persons may be seen fishing or at work in their plantations” (1978, 50).

24 This has led, notably, to the creation of an alternative globalization movement, consisting of civil society organizations, communities, and individuals, who have formed networks to contest current global and national economic and political decision making. See also Gupta 2002.

25 One need only look at the situation of Australian Aborigines, Hawaiians, Kanaks, and Native Americans, among other “minorities,” to question the fairness of representative democratic systems when it comes to colonized people.

26 See, for instance, Nincic 1992, and Noam Chomsky’s work on US foreign policy (1994; see also Chomsky and Herman 1988).

27 These means of publicity are far from perfect and one can question the current state of media and publishing with anti-trust laws being undone in the United States and Europe. In France, for instance, almost 70 percent of national newspapers are owned by two companies—Dassault and Lagardère—whose primary activity is the production of military hardware. See *L’exception française*, *Le Monde*, 16 March 2004.

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### *Abstract*

In the Samoan polity today, the indigenous institution of the *matai* (chiefs) continues to play a pivotal role in governance. In determining leadership, the *fa'asāmoa* (Samoan way) and the *fa'amatai* (way of the chiefs) are the most influential factors. Yet this has not prevented Sāmoa from experiencing governance problems found in other countries of the region, although perhaps on a lesser scale: misunderstanding, frustration, alienation, migration, discrimination, malpractice, patronage, and violence. Reasons for this may be (1) a lack of correspondence between *fa'asāmoa* and liberal democracy; (2) a lack of general understanding and critical assessment of the principles of liberal democracy in Sāmoa; (3) a combination of misuse, abuse, or misunderstanding of *fa'asāmoa*; and (4) a lack of publicity and critical assessment of the principles of *fa'asāmoa*. This paper examines aspects of these four characteristics of the Samoan polity and looks at ways of reassessing governance. It draws on literature that deals with some of the main features of Samoan political thought, as well as on discussions with Samoan scholars and thinkers. This introduction to a different approach to Samoan governance also briefly reviews some of the political forces and tensions at play in Sāmoa to show how they impact current political conceptualization.

KEYWORDS: Sāmoa, democracy, *fa'amatai*, *fa'asāmoa*, political thought, philosophy, governance

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